

Bills to expand access to health care, health insurance in jeopardy

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 04/15/07

HELENA — With two weeks remaining at the 2007 Legislature, several bills to expand uninsured Montanans' access to health care or health insurance are either dead or stalled in committee.

The proposals include expansion of government-funded health coverage for children, income-tax credits for individuals buying their own health insurance, state funding for community health clinics and insurance mandates for "well child" coverage.

Some have been killed or will die because legislative leaders have decided they break the state budget.

"It's like your own household budget; there are just certain things you can't do," said Sen. Trudi Schmidt, D-Great Falls, who chairs the Senate Finance and Claims Committee.

Others await action by the Republican-controlled House.

Rep. Bill Jones, R-Bigfork, who supports many of these proposals, said Saturday he's hopeful some will pass before the Legislature goes home at the end of April.

Yet House Speaker Scott Sales, R-Bozeman, said he doesn't support anything that expands government involvement in health care or health insurance.

"I think the free market works," he said Saturday. "The Legislature has made (health) insurance more expensive. They just exacerbate the problem. They're making it worse instead of better."

The bills and their status are:

Senate Bill 22, which expands the Children's Health Insurance Plan (CHIP), awaits action in the House Appropriations Committee. It could add at least 2,000 uninsured kids to the plan. CHIP provides health insurance for children in low- and moderate-income families who have trouble affording insurance.

House Bill 577, which would expand Medicaid coverage for kids, is in the Senate Finance and Claims Committee and likely dead. For a cost of \$1.4 million, the expansion would have covered as many as 4,000 additional kids in low-income families, as well as open up more slots in CHIP, said bill sponsor Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena.

HB687, which would require health insurance policies to offer "well child" coverage for children up to age 7, awaits action in a House-Senate conference committee. Jones, the sponsor, said he's confident it will gain approval.

HB198, which expands the dental care benefits for kids covered by CHIP, has been signed into law.

HB406, which would spend \$1.3 million the next two years to open or expand health clinics that serve low-income and uninsured Montanans, was killed Friday by the Senate Finance and Claims Committee.

HB801, which provide state income-tax credits for individuals who buy their own health insurance, is stalled in the Senate Taxation Committee. Rep. Gary MacLaren, R-Victor, said Saturday he suspects the bill will die in committee, because its price tag is thought to be too high. Its latest version would cost the state treasury \$70 million over the next two years.

SB206, which sets up a \$3 million pilot program to use Medicaid funds to finance health insurance for 1,700 people who work as home health-care aides, awaits action in the House Appropriations Committee.

Caferro said the fate of CHIP expansion "is in the hands of House Republicans right now," since they hold a 50-49 majority in the House and control the House Appropriations Committee, where the bill now sits.

The Senate, which is controlled by Democrats, last week approved funding for CHIP expansion. However, the bill in the House contains the language allowing the expansion.

Caferro also said she's disappointed that the Schweitzer administration won't support her Medicaid-for-kids bill and isn't more aggressively promoting CHIP expansion.

While the administration says the cost may be too high, Caferro says: "I think it's very fiscally responsible to invest in children's health care, especially when it draws down a federal match. We have a crisis with our uninsured rate for children."

The federal government pays about \$2 for every \$1 that the state spends on Medicaid and \$4 for every \$1 the state spends on CHIP.

But David Ewer, the governor's budget director, said Saturday the administration wants to keep within a \$1.8 billion state spending cap for 2009, and that many other items need to be funded, such as public schools, state colleges, prisons and public-employee pensions.

"Advocates have the option of focusing only on their issue," he said. "Governor Schweitzer must consider the whole picture. Leveraging federal funds requires state money, which is limited."

Schmidt also noted that lawmakers already have endorsed health and human-service funding that is \$16 million more than recommended by the governor, and said the line has to be drawn somewhere.